

The Development of Theatre in Brunei Darussalam - A Survey

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This article will generally discuss the early emergence of theatre in Brunei Darussalam as well as the problems relating thereto. It is hoped this can outline the theatrical activities and elements in Brunei Darussalam.

Experts and researchers define theatre as the place where acting takes place. Some define it as the writing and staging of theatrical activities in a grossly exaggerated manner, consciously and deliberately. Although both definitions are quite ambiguous and simplified, nonetheless they have given the basic meaning of the term.

Theatre, which is now more known than its original term "acting", is easy to say but very limited in its meaning. Acting began from the early existence of man, whose movement and behaviour are motivated by physical and spiritual needs. From the above definition we can find two important elements about theatre. First, the element of acting and, secondly, the element of motivation.

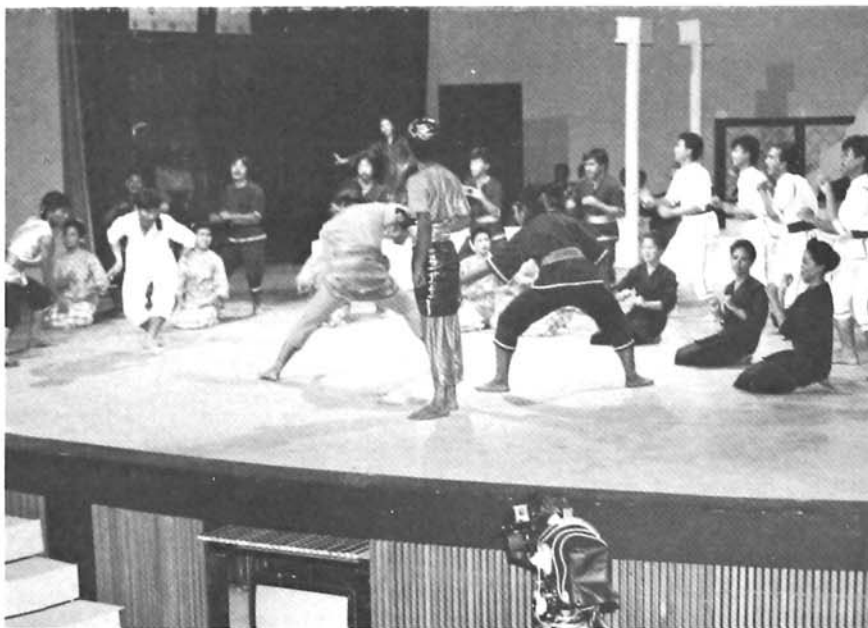
The motivating element refers to the audience and venue. The reason is that both actors and audience have the same degree of responsibility towards the success of an act. Finally, theatre can be described as something that combines all cultural activities.

THE BEGINNING OF THEATRE

Many deductions and assumption of historical significance had been made on the beginning of theatrical activities. It is not possible to determine exactly when or at which point of human civilization theatrical acts first appeared.

Although some may say the theatre came from the simplest form of dance, which was derived from the swaying and movements of trees and

birds surrounding them in abundance, others say it is started from the feeling of apprehension towards the change of the world, whether night and day or the seasonal change. Then there are also people who disagree with those theories. They suggested instead that theatre began when ceremonies of worshipping supernatural powers were held either to fight against evil spirits or to express gratitude. But basically theatre can be said to begin through imitations or



Cockfighting scene.

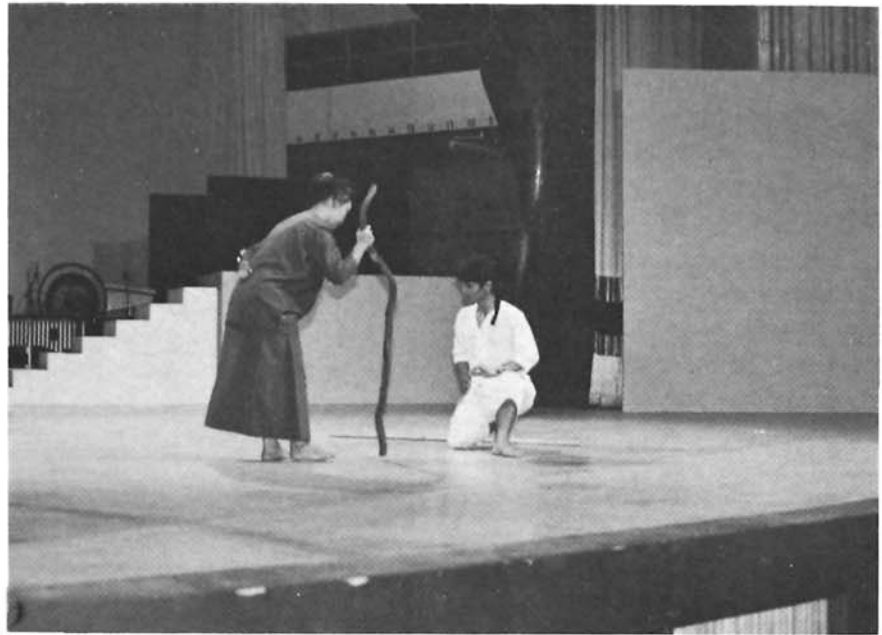
also known as mimesis, which means mimicking of animal's behaviour as far back as the primitive period.

The same can be said about the introduction of theatre in Brunei Darussalam. Based on the above factors as well as historical records, we can generally conclude that theatrical activities in Brunei Darussalam were more prominent before the arrival of Islam in the 15th century and this could be traced from the historical sequence of the Borneo Island. De Molcuus Insulis wrote:

...From Gibeth (Quipit in Mindanao) they proceed to the island of Prne (Borneo). In this archipelago there are two large islands; one of which is called Siloli (Gilolo). Since Prne must be considered to be more important than other islands, which they had hitherto visited, and it was from it that the other islanders had learned the arts of civilised life, I have determined to describe briefly the manners and customs of these nations. All these islanders are Caphrae or Kafirs, i.e., heathens; They worship the sun and the moon as Gods; they assign the government of the day to the sun and the night to the moon and the sun they consider to be male, the moon female.

If we compare this note with the history of the beginning of theatre, we can safely assume that theatre in the Borneo Island started at about the 15th century.

If the above fact is still doubtful, let us move to the period of traditional medicine, when man was often influenced by his physical and spiritual needs. We, in Brunei Darussalam, are rich with unique traditions. Our forebears used to treat ailments through ritual methods. "Bahantu" rites were carried out to call in spirits, to help cure sick people. There were also rituals to worship the beach and serve the *Anchak*.



Advice for the young prince.

It is therefore clear that we cannot pinpoint the exact time when theatre was first introduced to Brunei due to the unavailability of historical records. However, traces of traditions suggest that theatre was already in Brunei before the coming of Islam.

To support our views on the development of theatre in Brunei, we can also look into our traditional dances which contain the elements of imitation and ritual, such as "Alai Bubu" and "Alai Mambang". The mimesis element was also developed through the dresses, adornments and physical movements of the dancers, as evident in the dance "Alai Sekap".

The art of self-defence was also formed through the ritualistic combination of physical movements and mental force. The uniqueness and skill of a hunter with his hunting and communicating method also had the element of imitation in them and, as such, also contributed to the early emergence of theatre.

Customs and traditions are indirectly part of theatre, encompassing all cultural-oriented activities such as the manner of paying respect to the rural sultan, the seating arrangement of state dignitaries in ceremonial functions, the ways people speak and dress, ceremonies related to marriage which are full of adornments, decorations and exchanges of traditional *pantuns*.

The oral traditions among the elders also have the element of traditional theatre.

DEVELOPMENT THEATRE IN BRUNEI

As I mentioned earlier, many forms of theatre in Brunei were initially channeled through dances which had in them ritualistic elements. This could be further explained when in 1922, a 105 member cultural troupe presented a sketch on the

Brunei people's tradition at the Malaya Borneo Cultural Festival in Singapore, on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales to Singapore. The group presented the wedding ceremony as well as traditional dances of Brunei.

Although theatre in Brunei did not have all the elements that theatre should have, the arrival of a number of *bangsawan* troupes from neighbouring countries like Malaya in the '20s had made some changes and *bangsawan* theatre was introduced to Brunei.

The Brunei audience was very fascinated by the impressive shows of the *bangsawan* theatre groups. The plays were made with musical accompaniments, stage decorations, robes and make-up. This was really an eye-opener for theatre lovers of the old days.

It was also the first time for Brunei actors, like Haji Hasbollah Daud, Dato Jafar, Pengiran Hashim and Dollah Lelong, to be given the chance to act on stage in plays like "Jula Juli Bintang Tiga", "Siti Zubaidah", and "Gul Bakawali". The coming of the Indera Zanzibar *Bangsawan* Theatre Group from Malaya had at least introduced some kind of *bangsawan* theatre in Brunei.

In the 1930s, the development of theatre in Brunei took a slight turn with the appearance of a number of Tanjung Malim (Sultan Idris Teacher Training College) trained teachers like Pg. Md. Yussof, Nordin Latiff, Hussain Yussof, Mohd Noor Othman and H.M. Salleh. Together with established theatre actors like Hj Tuah Puteh, Yussof Rajid, Ali Khan, Abdullah Jaafar, Jasin Affendi and Ibrahim Ghani, they introduced some changes from theatre *bangsawan* to improvised theatre, which did not rely heavily on scripts. Dramas put on stage at that time were "Laksamana



The prince and the giant.

Bentan", "Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Dijulang", "Perang Kastela", etc.

During the Japanese occupation, from 1941 to 1945, the theatre was used as a means to play up the spirit of struggle and unity against the Japanese rule. According to H.M. Salleh, a performance, entitled "Kami Gayu", was staged by his group in order to incite the people to struggle for freedom. This shows how theatre played a very significant role in relaying a particular message to its intended audience.

After the Japanese occupation in 1946, theatrical activities in Brunei gained further momentum. Theatre presentations were held almost every Saturday night at the Kampung Berangan Amusement Park, where the Bandar Seri Begawan Youth Centre is now sited. An increasing number of youths then involved themselves in the staging of theatres.

These activities continued rapidly into the '60s with the further

involvement of youth and village associations as well as school children. Workshops on drama acting and script-writing were organized. In addition, drama competitions and drama script-writing contests were also organized by the Brunei Youth Council in conjunction with the coronation ceremony of the Sultan of Brunei in 1968.

Unfortunately though, by the early '70s, theatrical activities in Brunei slowly faded away. This was due to the strong influence of the electronic media, through the neighbouring country television network whose telecast had a fine reception in Brunei at that time. Television slowly but effectively deviated the interest of the people from open entertainment, including theatres, to the goggle-box which offered quality and money-saving daily programmes.

The waning interest in theatre further deteriorated with the introduction of Brunei's own television



Fighting the giant.



The victor

network in 1976. There was almost a total absence of public stage shows of drama during that period except for an odd number of presentations made by secondary school and college students, done on a small scale and limited to student audience.

The influence of television also had a strong impact on theatre actors themselves who became more inclined to acting in TV drama instead of on stage.

MODERN THEATRE IN BRUNEI

After the dark era in theatre development which was in the '70s, a number of clubs in secondary schools and colleges tried to revive the great moment of the past. The Language and Literary Club of SOAS College, for example, staged a drama from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Similar efforts were made by other clubs and these went on until the mid-'80s. Despite these efforts, the theatre still failed to show any development. In 1984, in conjunction with the Independence Day celebration of Brunei Darussalam, a drama competition was held. This attracted the interest of a number of welfare bodies and voluntary associations. It was hoped that this could help in realising the desire to make the theatre a media for the people. Alas, after the competition was over, the theatrical scene was quite again.

In the mid-'80s, a number of association, trying to gamble on the fate of theatre in Brunei were formed. Associations like *Rusila Negara*, *Kumpulan Putra Seni*, *Kastea Darussalam* and a few others tried hard to convince the people of the need for theatre in the midst of the strong influence of television electronics media. A gargantuan task indeed, especially at a time when video tape media snatched away the interest of the people from stage theatre. The impact of the video tapes was so great people even stayed away from film cinemas.

Despite all these, the development of modern theatre could still be felt in Brunei Darussalam though it might not be similar to the development taking place in neighbouring countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore.

Modern theatre is more popularly known as contemporary theatre. It is characterised by the distinct changes it brought, by combining all the elements of theatre which is sometimes so abstract that it is difficult to follow at a glance.

The development of modern theatre in Brunei was strongly influenced by the development of modern theatre in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. In the later part of the '80s, modern theatres were staged in Brunei, based on scripts from Malaysia and Indonesia. They were heavily motivated by acting

workshops guided by theatre personalities, from these two countries, who were responsible for adding new elements into modern theatre in Brunei Darussalam. This process resulted in the emergence of contemporary theatre, which is now actively performed by the *Putra Seni* and *Kastea Darussalam* groups. This sort of theatre attaches more importance to acting movements and dialogues than settings and fittings, as opposed to *bangsawan* theatre and realism, which were more established between the early '20s and the late '70s.

Despite the efforts of a number of theatre groups in Brunei to improve the quality of theatres so as to gain acceptance by the general public as an entertainment media, the response and involvement of the public is apparently not encouraging.

It is not true that theatre is not capable of being developed in Brunei, but theatre groups are concerned about the lack of public commitment and interest towards the staging of plays as well as the lack of attraction, suitable venues and scripts consistent with the concept and requirements of theatre. Hence, theatre activities in Brunei can be said to be seasonal or once-in-a-while occurrences.

There are also theatre lovers who are unable to develop their roles due to this cold response. It is the public audience, therefore, who would finally determine the future development and success of theatre in Brunei Darussalam. ■

GLOSSARY

Ancak

Tray woven from palm fronds and woods for offering food to spirits.

Pantun

Quatrains, old poetry consisting of verses of four or six lines each.

Bangsawan

Musical play or theatre